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NAPOLEON AND THE SENTRY

By

P. B. CORNEAU

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NAPOLEON AND THE SENTRY

A PLAY IN ONE ACT

By

P. B. CORNEAU

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PS 3505
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1916

CAST OF CHARACTERS

NAPOLEON, The Emperor.....

JEAN, a French Soldier in Napoleon's Army.....

SENTRY, a French Soldier.....

WOMAN, a young wife in French costume in the time of Napoleon Bonaparte .....

PLAYS THIRTY MINUTES.

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no 1.

NAPOLEON AND THE SENTRY

SCENE—*The open country. A vast plain, dotted with clumps of trees and bushes, shimmering in the vague, uncertain light of the half-clouded moon.*

In a little open space are the embers of a fire. Over this a SENTRY *is leaning, carefully turning some bit of food, meat or a sausage, which is cooking over the embers. He is evidently very hungry and can scarcely wait till it is done. Finally he can resist no longer and taking a small piece of the meat from the fire with his knife takes a bite of it. It proves to be quite hot. He drops it with a howl and jumps up. As he does so his musket, which has been resting against his knee and shoulder falls and is discharged. Shouts are heard outside. The* SENTRY *hurriedly takes the food from the fire and hides it in the bushes. A piece of bread is lying on a rock near the fire. He takes the bread to hide it, but hearing someone coming he hastily crams it all into his mouth.* JEAN *enters, running.*

JEAN. The enemy? Are they coming? Where?

SENTRY. [*Who is trying to eat the bread.*] Ugh—ugh—ugh—

JEAN. Comrade—You are wounded?

SENTRY. Ugh—ugh—ugh—

JEAN. I cannot understand you.

[JEAN *looks out across the plain as looking for the enemy. Then his eyes turn to the fire. Some food still remains there that the* SENTRY *had forgotten to remove. The* SENTRY *follows his glance.*]

SENTRY. [*Suddenly, shouting.*] There they are! There! Fire! There! [*He points off frantically.* JEAN *raises his rifle and fires. While he is doing so the* SENTRY *hastily takes the meat from the fire and puts it in his pocket.*]

JEAN. Where were they? I see no one.

SENTRY. There isn't anybody. I dropped my gun; and it went off.

JEAN. But, Comrade, you said—

SENTRY What did I say—? Bah! Bah! Don't get the Lieutenant here.

JEAN. [*Calling off.*] Lieutenant! Everything is all right— Yes, it was a mistake, Lieutenant.

SENTRY. What are you doing here? Did you come to relieve me?

JEAN. Yes, it is past two.

SENTRY. Did you bring anything to eat with you?

JEAN. No.

SENTRY. You would have relieved me a good deal more if you had brought me something to eat.

JEAN. There is very little to be had to eat in camp. Besides I am too sleepy to think of food.

SENTRY. Too sleepy to think of food! Comrade, I dream of food.

JEAN. I am terribly sleepy. Listen, Comrade, last night I went to see my wife and my little girl.

SENTRY. Your wife and child— How is that possible?

JEAN. This country is my home. I slipped past the lines and went to my cottage—eleven miles—eleven miles back— But, Comrade, one's wife and child!

[*The* SENTRY *begins to weep, making a great noise about it.*]

JEAN. [*Sympathetically.*] Ah, Comrade, you too have a wife and child.

SENTRY. Ah, you know that by my tears. None but a married man weeps like this. [*He continues to weep.*]

JEAN. Comrade— Comrade—

SENTRY. I picture them to myself as they sit at home by the fire. Like this—look—here my aged parents—there my wife—here my two beautiful children—two of the most beautiful children in all Europe. It is a pity, Comrade, but their mother is not beautiful at all. The children do not resemble her in the least.

JEAN. It is a touching picture—

SENTRY. Ah, you have not heard all. They sit about the fire, parents and wife, and the two children the living images of their father, who stands before you, weary from long days of fighting and marching, with nothing to eat—that is, nothing to speak of—Ah, Comrade Jean, when I picture them sitting there—I cannot restrain my tears. [*He weeps again.*]

JEAN. Comrade, I feel for you.

SENTRY. Ah, but you have not heard all. What are they doing, my family? What are they doing as they sit about the fire?

JEAN. Tell me, Comrade, what?

SENTRY. [*Almost overcome with emotion.*] They are eating sausages.

JEAN. Sausages!

SENTRY. Do you wonder, Comrade, that I weep?

JEAN. Bah! You have the soul of a pig!

SENTRY. A pig must eat. For days the army has had scarcely any food at all.

JEAN. But think, Comrade, of the glory of the cause for which we fight and starve—our invaded fatherland and the glory of our Emperor.

SENTRY. [*Grudgingly.*] Napoleon is a great man—

JEAN. Assuredly—

SENTRY. Why? Because he is in a big place.

JEAN. The Emperor's glory is a matter of history.

SENTRY. Why is he where he is—at the head of the armies—at the head of the nation—? Why?

JEAN. Because it is God's will.

SENTRY. It is because he has three good meals a day. That is why. Let me tell you, Comrade, if I had three

good meals a day for a week I could fight Europe single-handed.

JEAN. Why do you keep watching the bushes so closely?

SENTRY. Nothing. I was not watching the bushes.

JEAN. You are watching something.

SENTRY. [*Edging around so as to get between* JEAN *and the bushes where the food is hidden.*] Jean!—Look!

JEAN. What?

SENTRY. [*Pointing.*] There—there— Is it the light flashing from a bayonet?

JEAN. I can't see.

SENTRY. Step out beyond the bushes. You can see clearer there.

JEAN. No—you are the sentry.

SENTRY. No, pardon me, you are. You have just relieved me.

JEAN. Well—then—

SENTRY. Quick—quick.

[JEAN *goes out beyond the bushes on the other side. The* SENTRY *quickly takes the food from beneath the bushes and hides it in his pocket.* JEAN *comes back.*]

SENTRY. Well—?

JEAN. I could see nothing.

SENTRY. I must have been mistaken. I am so weak from hunger that I think I am subject to hallucinations.

JEAN. I am not hungry. It is want of sleep that troubles me. I am afraid I cannot stay awake on my watch to-night. Even now could I throw myself on the ground I would be asleep in an instant. And sleep— Out there somewhere in the night, out there somewhere in the moonlight, are bayonets and cannon. Across this plain, beyond the wide river lie the enemy. And sleep at my post to-night would mean— [*He pauses and shrugs his shoulders.*]

SENTRY. Napoleon would have you shot. That's what. [*He is silent a moment, thinking it over, as he prepares to return to camp.*]

SENTRY. But why should he? Is it right that he should?

JEAN. It is the rule of war.

SENTRY. Oh, that is well enough where there is danger. But I ask you this: how could the enemy attack us when there is a river, a great ungainly river between us, deep as the very ocean? It is not justice, I say.

JEAN. [*Thoughtfully.*] There is somewhere about here a ford. I do not know exactly where it is. But there is one. I could find it perhaps; one not knowing the country could not. For unless one knew it he would never suspect that it was there. But the enemy knows, no doubt, that it is there. There are traitors among the peasants who will tell them. And Napoleon knows it; for there is nothing that the Emperor does not know.

SENTRY. That is true, Comrade.

JEAN. And consequently he will have you or me shot quick as that [*He snaps his fingers.*] if we sleep on guard.

SENTRY. That is true, Jean. But as good to die of being shot as of starvation as I am doing.

JEAN. Comrade, will you do something for me? Will you share my watch with me?

SENTRY. To keep watch with you? Why?

JEAN. I am so sleepy I am afraid I cannot stay awake.

SENTRY. You ask this of me, Jean? Do you consider me as a beast without understanding, that I would be willing to watch while you lie snoring by the fire, warm and snug, with your cloak about you? I go to camp. [*He starts off.*]

JEAN. No, no, Comrade! Listen! It is not that I consider you a beast without understanding. It is that I know your generous soul. Listen. Over there, miles away, near where the right wing of the enemy lies, I was born. There I have always lived. There now, Comrade, live my wife and my little girl. For a year, Comrade, I had not seen them. Last night, instead of sleeping—though the night before I had been almost without sleep—I left the camp; I crossed the plain; I swam the river—I had no time to search for the ford—I passed the sentries

of the enemy. I came to my native village, to my own house. And for the first time in a year I saw my wife and my little girl. Only a kiss and a few words, and back again past the sentries of the enemy, across the river and the plain. Then all day work on the entrenchments, the threatened attack—That, Comrade, is why I can scarcely keep awake.

SENTRY. But, Jean, that may be true. But I already have kept my watch. I too am sleepy. And if we both sleep there are two that will be blindfolded in the morning.

JEAN. Comrade, you are right. I do not ask it.

SENTRY. Jean, I am a grumbler—I am selfish—But I will stay.

JEAN. No—no—

SENTRY. I will keep watch with you. I will keep awake somehow.

JEAN. No—You must not—Go—Go— [*He pushes the* SENTRY *off.*]

[JEAN *stands still a moment, gazing out across the plain, then walks to and fro, then stops, then moves about again. After a while he goes to the fire and stirs it up and puts on more sticks It blazes up. He stoops down by it to warm his hands. His head nods drowsily. He almost falls over on the ground. He rouses himself and begins to walk back and forth once more. He halts and examines his musket. Then he begins to mutter to himself.*]

JEAN. Jean! Jean! You must keep awake—awake—Jean, do you hear! You must—It is necessary—It is life or death—Do not go to sleep, Jean, do not—If you do Napoleon will have you shot. Remember that. Remember your wife,—your little girl.— You *must* keep awake—awake—If I sit down that will rest me. I shall not be so drowsy then. No! No! Don't do it. You will fall asleep. [*He begins to sing, but stops suddenly.*]

"Madame Veto avait pron—" But I shall try it just a minute—just a minute—

[*He crouches on the ground.*]

Only a minute—a minute—a min—

[*His head sinks lower and lower. His musket slips to the ground. He stretches himself out, face downward, with a sigh. He sleeps.*——

The fire dies down until it is again only a mass of glowing embers. The vast silent plain shimmers in the moonlight. JEAN *moans and moves a little in his sleep, then lies motionless. An hour passes—or a moment—*

From somewhere, in the shadow of the bushes, has come the figure of a man, indistinct as yet. It stands motionless a moment, a short, broad, sturdy figure, ominous, reassuring, as one thinks of the sleeping sentry, or of the foe across the plain. Then it steps forward into the moonlight. It is NAPOLEON.

Nothing escapes his observation; yet his face expresses no emotion. He lifts his eyes from their glance at the sleeping sentry and gazes for a long time across the plain. Then, noticing the sentry again, he goes to him and kneeling beside him takes up his musket. JEAN'S *cloak has fallen from about his shoulder.* NAPOLEON *replaces it carefully, then rises and stands leaning on the musket, gazing out across the plain.*]

NAPOLEON. [*Talking to himself.*] Emperor!—Arbiter of the fortunes of Europe, of the world!—I have reached and stand on the summit of human power—But the footing is slippery—And from the summit to the depths what a tremendous fall!—The least misstep—the loss of the battle to-morrow—The river—if I could cross—They could find no ford—If there were one I could cross—and attack, not on their chosen ground but on mine—their right flank and rear would crumble—As it is I can attack only their center—Their position is strong—Defeat!—Defeat for Napoleon!—River, are you to be my conqueror, the conqueror of Napoleon!

[JEAN *moves uneasily in his sleep.* NAPOLEON *watches him. He does not wake and soon becomes still again.* NAPOLEON *stands brooding, without motion.*

From among the bushes suddenly springs a young

woman, little more than a girl, in the dress of a peasant. Her clothing is torn, her hair flying. She does not notice JEAN *lying on the ground. Her eyes are on* NAPOLEON.

NAPOLEON *hears her and turns, not as the sentry would, with bayonet advanced, but quietly, commanding. Before him the woman feels a terror she does not understand.*]

WOMAN. You are not Jean—

[NAPOLEON *does not answer; nor does he give any sign that he has heard her.*]

WOMAN. My husband—He said to-night he would do sentry duty—I have asked all the sentries—His post is about here—A sentry knew him—He sent me this way—Jean? Do you know him, monsieur?

[NAPOLEON *does not answer. She begins to falter.*]

WOMAN. He is not here—It is farther on that he is stationed—? I will go— [*She moves off. An almost imperceptible gesture of* NAPOLEON'S *stops her.*] You know my husband—where is he?

[NAPOLEON *makes no reply. She follows his glance and notices for the first time the sleeping* JEAN.]

WOMAN. Oh!—

NAPOLEON. Is that your husband?

WOMAN. Yes—yes—He is the sentry? He sleeps—You take his place?— [*Her voice rises and shakes with fear.*] Who are you?

[NAPOLEON *turns ever so little; and the moonlight falls on his face.*]

WOMAN. [*Falling on her knees.*] The Emperor!

NAPOLEON. You are a soldier's wife. You know that for the sentry who sleeps at his post the penalty is—

WOMAN. [*Crying out, interrupting him.*] Sire! Hear me!—Forgive him—Sire—

NAPOLEON. He is a sentry. [*He points first to* JEAN, *then to the moonlit plain.*] Over there, beyond the river, is the enemy.

WOMAN. Sire—He is worn out. Days of fighting and marching—sleepless nights—He is not iron as you are, Sire. He is a mortal, not a god.

NAPOLEON. [*Affected a little by the flattery.*] It may be possible that I have expected too much of my soldiers. But what are you doing here?

WOMAN. I am his wife. This country is our home. I knew he kept watch to-night. I came here to see him once more. To-morrow they say there will be a battle. And in a battle—who knows what may happen. It is more than a year since he went away from me to fight for his Emperor. Last night he came to me, to his home. Last night, though weary, he took neither rest nor sleep. In the darkness he left the camp to visit his wife and child. Three hours over the plain, three hours back to camp. No wonder, Sire, that sleep has overcome him.

NAPOLEON. He went without his rest last night that he might visit you?

WOMAN. Yes, Sire. To visit his wife and child. Few women have such a husband. There are not many soldiers, worn out with days of battle that would do as much. You will not punish a man like that, Sire?

NAPOLEON. I have exacted much from my soldiers. Had he fallen asleep from weariness from doing his duty I would have pardoned him. But what you have told me has changed the aspect of the affair. He who puts his wife and child before his country and his Emperor is a traitor.

WOMAN. [*In terror.*] Sire—!

NAPOLEON. This suffices. Return to your village.

WOMAN. Sire—No—No—He—he did not come to see me. He did not come to me last night. He does not know I came. I have not seen him since the early spring, a year ago—a year ago—

[NAPOLEON *turns away from her.*

She makes a gesture of despair and stands for a moment as if not knowing what to do. Suddenly she runs to JEAN *and gazes at him intently.* JEAN *moves an arm convulsively, changes his position slightly, and sleeps more soundly than before. She goes back and stands before* NAPOLEON.]

WOMAN. Sire, I was mistaken. That is not my husband.—It is amusing. [*She tries to laugh, but does not succeed very well.*] That is not my husband at all. Such a droll mistake! My husband is a large man, great, gruff—old—with a scar on his cheek. It is the firelight that deceived me.—This poor soldier—I do not know him.—But you will pardon him, Sire?

[NAPOLEON *does not reply. He is gazing once more across the plain. His right hand moves a little, now as if pointing out something, now like the hand of a chess player.*]

WOMAN. Sire, you must answer me.

NAPOLEON. He must die.

WOMAN. Sire! Sire—He is not my husband.

NAPOLEON. Wake him.

WOMAN. Oh—Oh—I cannot—

NAPOLEON. Wake him and say farewell. The time is short. It is near daybreak.

WOMAN. [*Going toward* JEAN *and drawing back.*] Oh—I cannot— [*Suddenly with a cry she rushes to* NAPOLEON *and throws herself on the ground at his feet, clasping his knees.*] Sire—In the name of the good God —Sire—

[NAPOLEON *tries to shake her off. She rises to her knees, still clinging to him. She clasps his arm, uttering half unintelligible cries and ejaculations.* NAPOLEON *tries again to free himself. In doing so he touches her skirt.*]

NAPOLEON. Your dress is wet. There is no dew on the ground.—How did you come here?

WOMAN. Across the river, Sire.

NAPOLEON. You did not swim?

WOMAN. I cannot swim. I crossed by the ford.

NAPOLEON. There is no ford.

WOMAN. I crossed by it, Sire.

NAPOLEON. They told me there was no ford.

WOMAN. They are stupid. Any child hereabouts knows there is one.—But few know where to find it who have not been born hereabouts.

NAPOLEON. Could you find it again?

WOMAN. This country is my home. It is twenty years since I was born. What girl does not know her own country?

NAPOLEON. It is wide and safe?

WOMAN. An army could cross, Sire.

NAPOLEON. An army shall.

[*In the distance is heard the report of a cannon.*]

NAPOLEON. Hark! The battle is beginning. Listen. You will show the way across the ford. Marmont will cross and attack the right flank and the rear while I attack the center as they expect. Between us their right wing will be crushed and crumpled as easily as a sheet of paper. [*He stands listening to the sound of the distant cannon which is momentarily increasing in volume.*]

WOMAN. Sire!—But my husband—

NAPOLEON. I had forgotten. Wake him.

[*The* WOMAN *goes to* JEAN *and shakes him.* NAPOLEON *stands grimly watching.* JEAN *wakens, dazed, confused. He recognizes his wife with a cry of surprise. He sees the terror on her face and turns and sees* NAPOLEON. *But he does not yet quite realize the situation. He looks about, collecting his thoughts. Then he realizes what has happened and becomes limp with fear.*]

WOMAN. Jean! Jean! Speak to him—Beseech him—

JEAN. Sire—I have slept—Death— [*The sky grows red with dawn.*] The last sunrise—

WOMAN. [*Pleading.*] Sire—Sire—

NAPOLEON. [*As if awakening from a dream.*] You spoke to me—?

WOMAN. Sire—Sire—Pardon him—pardon him—

[*The cannonade grows louder.*]

NAPOLEON. Listen, my children! You hear them—my cannon—? Listen! It is my spirit knocking at the doors of fate. Soon the very earth on which we stand will rock and tremble with the sound. At my bidding the demons of eternal hate will blacken this meadow with smoke and water the grass on which we stand with blood. Hark! The winds of destiny are rising—It is the whirlwind of the death of nations. And I, Napoleon,

guide the storm. Fate has tossed you to my hands to bring me victory. Live—die—What does it matter?

WOMAN. You pardon him—?

[NAPOLEON *dismisses the matter with a wave of his hand. She clasps* JEAN *in her arms.*]

NAPOLEON. What is life? What is death? How many times again will this field be a battleground? How many times will bayonets sweep across it in glittering lines? How many times again will the "Marseillaise" sound out above the roar of cannon? Ah, the world has been a battleground and will be many times again. This river before me—how many times have its waters been red with blood! The Meuse, the Marne, the Aisne—their banks will re-echo again and again to the sound of cannon.

JEAN. Sire, the battle is beginning.

NAPOLEON. Another victory. They thought I was beaten. But they shall see. They shall know that I am still Napoleon.

[*The cannonade grows louder. The music of a band is heard, and the cheering of troops advancing into battle.*]

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